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HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST TIMOR

HON. TOM HARKIN
OF IOWA
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 16, 1980

● Mr. HARKIN. Mr. Speaker, I have submitted today a sense of Congress resolution expressing concern about conditions in East Timor and calling upon the President to take certain actions with respect to the situation there. The resolution—a bipartisan effort—has 55 cosponsors. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss conditions in East Timor and describe the resolution we have proposed.

East Timor is half an island in the Indonesian archipelago which was a Portuguese colony until 1975. When the Portuguese left and rival East Timorese groups began competing for power, the Indonesian military invaded the island and sealed it off from all contact with the outside world. Relief organizations, journalists, church groups, and other foreigners were thrown out of East Timor, and a blanket of silence thrown over Indonesian activities in the area for the next 5 years.

Last year, news reports began trickling out of Indonesia that hundreds of thousands of East Timorese who had fled to the mountains to escape the Indonesian military were now drifting down into Indonesian-controlled areas. The appalling physical condition of these people is evidence that the Indonesian military's extensive bombing of villages, hamlets, and cropland had the effect of pacifying the population and forcing the sick and starving refugees into Indonesian military camps. Estimates of the number of deaths from war, disease, and starvation vary from one-tenth—the Government of Indonesia's claim—to one-half—estimates by church and human rights groups—of the approximately 700,000 East Timorese recorded in a 1974 church census. By any calculation, however, the Indonesian military incursion has clearly devastated East Timor.

Representatives from the U.S. Government visited these camps with relief personnel in September of 1979 and reported horrifying conditions there. One aid official called the disease and famine the worst he had ever seen—including the Thai-Cambodian border. The International Red Cross—which had been petitioning the Government of Indonesia unsuccessfully since the invasion to provide aid in East Timor—at last began their feeding and medical programs the following month. The United States supplied $1.8 million to the International Red Cross in medicine and food supplies, and $10,016,062 to the Catholic Relief Service, which includes $5 million in Public Law 480 commodities.

Today, 7 months after the programs began, the situation in East Timor is improving. Recent cables from the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta indicate that the health and nutrition of the approximately 300,000 East Timorese who have been reached by the Catholic Relief Service and the International Red Cross is vastly improved.

It is clear, however, that continued food and medical assistance is needed, particularly in the south central and eastern portions of the territory. Accordingly to recent reports from East Timorese church officials, there are many needy areas that the aid organizations have not reached, and hunger and disease continue to be a problem in East Timor. Additionally, the ICRC and CRS hope to stimulate agricultural initiatives in all areas of the territory because without a good maintenance program, the health and nutritional levels could slip back to the critical situation of last year.

In addition to the valuable food and medical assistance relief organizations provide in East Timor, it is clear that the presence of the ICRC, in particular, contributes to more humane administration by the Indonesian military. The following is a quotation from a March 8 cable from the U.S. mission in Geneva which the Department of State made available to me:

(ICRC official Mr. Convers) said that the presence of the ICRC delegates in East Timor had an ancillary benefit in providing a measure of security against possible reprisals and arbitrary acts of violence by the Indonesian security forces. ICRC fully recognizes the importance of its continuing role as the principal agency with outside, non-Indonesian personnel regularly functioning in East Timor. Although their operational program is focused on relief assistance, the Swiss ICRC delegates are also well aware of the function they serve in observing the human rights situation.

It is precisely because of the ICRC's role in monitoring and restraining Indonesian military excesses and human rights abuses in East Timor that the numbers of non-Indonesian personnel should be increased. Currently there are three Swiss relief personnel in East Timor. The Congress should encourage the Government of Indonesia to allow more ICRC personnel, as well as representatives from the United Nations and other organizations into the area to monitor ongoing military operations there.

I am particularly concerned about the problems of the East Timorese who want to leave the island. A March 8 report filed in the Portugese newspaper Expresso based on interviews with dozens of refugees from East Timor describes the bribes that must be paid to Indonesian military officials in order to leave East Timor. It is clear that the Government of Indonesia has a highly selective and discriminatory emigration policy. The ethnic Chinese in East Timor who could afford to pay the bribes have been allowed to leave, but thousands of full-blooded East Timorese have not only been prohibited from emigration, but subjected to repression and abuse as well.

My colleagues and I have sponsored the following resolution because we believe a strong gesture of congressional concern is needed about the continued presence of Indonesian troops in East Timor, the restriction of international aid personnel, the restrictions on East Timorese emigration, and continuing human rights violations on the island. We believe that the current situation in East Timor demands special attention from the President, and would urge him to take the actions described in the proposed congressional resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to make available to my colleagues in the Congress a report from the London Sunday Observer, Sunday, March 23, which highlights some of the continuing problems in East Timor:

H. RES. —

A resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the President should take certain actions with respect to East Timor

Whereas an estimated 100,000 East Timorese have died from starvation, disease, and fighting resulting from the invasion and occupation of East Timor by the Government of Indonesia;

Whereas an estimated 400,000 East Timorese have been displaced from their homes;

Whereas the majority of the East Timorese people have suffered from malnutrition and hunger;

Whereas the Government of Indonesia refuses to permit the free emigration of East Timorese people;

Whereas the Government of Indonesia has not allowed free access to East Timor by the United Nations, relief agencies, humanitarian organizations, journalists, or church groups;

Whereas the United Nations, the Interparliamentary Union, and the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations have repeatedly condemned the Government of Indonesia for its invasion and unilateral annexation of East Timor; and

Whereas the people of East Timor have not been permitted to freely exercise their right of political self-determination: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the House of Representatives calls upon the President to immediately—

(1) increase humanitarian assistance to East Timor by providing to East Timor through non-governmental organizations more food, commodities, medical supplies, and funds;

(2) encourage the Government of Indonesia to allow the free emigration of those East Timorese wishing to leave the country and to allow international relief personnel and journalists free access to East Timor;

(3) establish a United States presence in East Timor to monitor the distribution of relief aid and the emigration of East Timorese; and

(4) encourage the Government of Indonesia to withdraw its troops from East Timor and to allow an internationally supervised election in which the East Timorese can freely exercise their right of self-determination.

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[From the London Observer, Mar. 23, 1980]

"SLAVE" ISLANDERS STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

(By Brian Eads, Jakarta, Indonesia)

Malnutrition and disease are still more widespread in East Timor than in ravaged Cambodia, but the people are slowly struggling back to life.

The picture emerges from conversations with knowledgeable sources in the Indonesian capital, four years after Jakarta's troops annexed the tiny former Portuguese colony by brute force and proclaimed it the nation's twenty-seventh province.

My application to visit the territory was rejected by the so-called G-Division, the armed forces intelligence bureau that wields supreme authority over East Timor.

'Indonesia is a big place,' I was told by a grinning colonel, 'why don't you go somewhere else?'

It seems Indonesia is distressed that foreign visitors dwell on the past, rather than looking towards the rosy future mapped out in a glossy government brochure entitled 'East Timor to build a better tomorrow.'

By all accounts, the past is still likely to thump you in the eye, and if you are an Indonesian in uniform, it's liable to shoot at you.

In an effort to blunt international criticism of their actions in East Timor, Jakarta is allowing two relief agencies to care for the 300,000 people, more than half the population, who fled their homes and were reduced to starvation after the Indonesian invasion.

Progress has been made. 'They're not dying like they were when we arrived five months ago,' said one relief worker. The observation is relative. People continue to die from intestinal diseases and malaria complicated by acute malnutrition and vitamin deficiency.

Neither the Catholic Relief Service nor the International Red Cross teams are allowed sufficient access to make meaningful assessments of how far their emergency aid has cut death rates.

Perhaps the most telling observation came last week, from an official who'd recently visited Cambodia. He said that medically the East Timorese are in a worse state than the Khmers.

Indonesia recently rejected an offer from the United Nations Children's Fund to add its weight to the relief effort. Relief officials are confident that the Catholic service and the Red Cross at least will be allowed to continue their work when the initial agreement, giving them six months' access, expires next month.

BROKEN SPIRIT

After this the fate of East Timor is anyone's guess, and glossy brochures and promises aside, the indications do not bode well.

The hungry and malnourished 300,000 came down from the hills towards the end of 1978 when three years of Indonesian military attrition had broken the back and the spirit of their resistance.

They are now confined to 'resettlement villages,' each with its squad of Indonesian troops.

Relief officials hope that maize already planted near the villages will provide enough to feed the people for five months this year, but there are doubts about whether the disruption of the people's semi-nomadic, tribal life-style will enable them to feed themselves in the future.

The only evidence of Indonesian development plans are the 'resettlement villages,' and the schools staffed by teachers shipped in from Indonesia, with the officially stated aim of 'washing their brains' of Fretilin's nationalist ideology.

Visitors say the relationship between Indonesians and East Timorese is like that between master and slave, and that there is little prospect of renewed resistance from a severely traumatised population.

I was told that in the capital, Dili, educated East Timorese are confined in at least one, and perhaps more, 'concentration camps.'

Australia and the US now oppose UN resolutions affirming the right of the East Timorese people to self-determination. Britain, for its part, abstains, but will shortly deliver eight BAC Hawk ground attack/trainer aircraft to the Indonesian armed forces.

The considerations which prompted Indonesia to gobble up East Timor, and won the tacit support of the West remain—unimpeded passage through her waters for warships of the US Pacific Fleet, the possibility of offshore oil, and the need to discourage separatist inclinations in Indonesia's outer islands.

'Looking at it now,' said a source in Jakarta, 'I see that East Timor never had a hope. They're just too small to stand up for themselves and no one is prepared to stand up for them.'

The death toll since the Indonesian invasion is put at somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000.

The joyless prospect for East Timor is that it will become just another impoverished backwater in Jakarta's far flung empire.●